

Title	Unisonance in kung fu film music, or the Wong Fei-hung theme song as a Cantonese transnational anthem
Authors	McGuire, Colin P.
Publication date	2018-05-04
Original Citation	McGuire, C. P. (2018) 'Unisonance in kung fu film music, or the Wong Fei-hung theme song as a Cantonese transnational anthem', <i>Ethnomusicology Forum</i> , 27(1), pp. 48-67. doi: 10.1080/17411912.2018.1463549
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/citedby/10.1080/17411912.2018.1463549">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/citedby/10.1080/17411912.2018.1463549</a> - 10.1080/17411912.2018.1463549
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Download date	2023-05-05 04:50:34
Item downloaded from	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10468/6619">http://hdl.handle.net/10468/6619</a>



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To cite this article: Colin P. McGuire (2018) Unisonance in kung fu film music, or the Wong Fei-hung theme song as a Cantonese transnational anthem, *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 27:1, 48-67, DOI: [10.1080/17411912.2018.1463549](https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2018.1463549)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2018.1463549>



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Published online: 04 May 2018.



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# Unisonance in kung fu film music, or the Wong Fei-hung theme song as a Cantonese transnational anthem

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## ABSTRACT

Wong Fei-hung was a Cantonese martial arts master from southern China who became associated with a melody called ‘General’s Ode’. Since the 1950s, over 100 Hong Kong movies and television shows have forged the link by using this melody as Master Wong’s theme. During fieldwork in a Chinese Canadian kung fu club, I observed several consultants claiming this piece as a Cantonese national anthem—a hymn for a nation without a sovereign state. Virtual ethnography conducted online showed that this opinion is held more widely, but that the piece also inspires broader Chinese nationalist sentiment. My analysis of speech-tone relationships to melodic contour in Cantonese and Mandarin versions of the song, however, has revealed a tight integration with the former that the latter lacked. By sharpening Anderson’s concept of unisonance, I explore how this song has become an unofficial transnational anthem for Cantonese people, arguing that Master Wong’s theme auralises an abstract sense of imagined community.

## KEYWORDS

Anthems; unisonance; transnations; diasporas; nationalism; imagined communities; music and martial arts; kung fu movies; Hong Kong cinema; Wong Fei-hung; Huang Feihong; *Once Upon a Time in China*; Cantonese

## Introduction

A national anthem is a nation-state’s official musical symbol, but music may also achieve unofficial anthem status for nations that precede, rupture, exceed and transgress the seemingly stable territories and borders of states. This fraught situation highlights that the word nation can refer not only to a sovereign nation-state, but also a community of people who share a common cultural, ethnic, linguistic, historical and/or geographic identity, without necessarily having an autonomous state of its own. In reference to the latter sense, I draw from post-colonial studies to think of transnations as cosmopolitan social groups whose ‘patriotism could become plural, serial, contextual, and mobile’ (Appadurai 1993: 428), and to recognise that their flexible being-in-the-world cuts across, around and through citizenship-based ideas of nationality (Ashcroft 2010). In so doing, I nuance Benedict Anderson’s ([1983] 2006) imagined communities to extend past the nationalism of bounded sovereign territories. Herein, I aim to sharpen Anderson’s concept of unisonance, referring to the collectivistic feeling experienced by people hearing and/or singing a national

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anthem ([1983] 2006: 132–3), in order to use it as an ethnomusicological tool. This article is an investigation of unofficial anthems as aural signs of transnations.

My case study focuses on Cantonese people [大粵人],<sup>1</sup> whose homeland centres on southern China's Guangdong Province, extending to eastern Guangxi Autonomous Region, northern Vietnam, Hong Kong and Macau. They speak dialects of Yue Chinese [粵語], of which Cantonese [廣州話]<sup>2</sup> is the prestige variant associated with Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong. With a global population of approximately 73 million speakers, Yue/Cantonese has comparable numbers to French, Turkish and Vietnamese.<sup>3</sup> The Cantonese diaspora is large and global. Cantonese people are a prime example of a transnation because of how their imagined community crosses both internal constituencies of the Chinese state and international borders. Their transnational imaginary is evidenced by numerous websites, blogs and Facebook pages espousing an aspirational Republic of Cantonia [大粵民國].

In this article, I argue that Cantonese people feel unisonance when hearing a version of the melody 'General's Ode' [〈將軍令〉],<sup>4</sup> which catalyses the song's associations with martial virtue and patriotism, allowing it to be experienced as an unofficial transnational anthem. This unisonant, anthemic experience is intrinsically connected to Hong Kong cinema's long-time use of the piece as a theme song for a nineteenth/twentieth-century southern Chinese martial arts folk hero named Wong Fei-hung [黃飛鴻].<sup>5</sup> While many film and cultural studies scholars have taken an interest in Wong Fei-Hung (e.g., Li 2001; Lo 1993; Po 2012; Rodriguez 1997; Williams 2000), only two music researchers have published on these movies. Their work provides a history of the theme song's connection with Master Wong (Yu Siu-wah 2012, 2013) and an interpretation of intertextual Chinese masculinity in Wong Fei-hung film music (Weng 2014), but there remains a lacuna surrounding the song's broader cultural importance. Hong Kong kung fu movies have a global following; however, it is among Cantonese people that Master Wong and his song have become institutions, spanning generations of audiences in over 100 productions since the 1950s. Wong Fei-hung's righteous martial arts ethos of resistance to domination empowers his theme music. I contend that the tune's enduring popularity is tied to issues of abstract national pride, pointing to Cantonese ambivalence about China as a modern nation-state.

Hong Kong is the de facto capital of a global transnation, serving as the hub of what historian Henry Yu (2013) calls the Cantonese Pacific. After Hong Kong was ceded to Britain following the first Opium War in 1842, it grew from a collection of fishing villages

<sup>1</sup>I use English translations wherever possible to make the text more legible for people who do not know Chinese. In cases where a common romanisation already exists, I defer to convention. As necessary, I also give Chinese characters. My choice to avoid Standard Chinese (aka Mandarin, Putonghua or Guoyu) for transliterating into English is consciously subversive, intervening in hegemonic language politics. At the same time, people who know Chinese will be able to read the characters in whatever dialect they please.

<sup>2</sup>Historically, both Guangdong Province and its capital Guangzhou have been referred to in English as Canton, and the word Cantonese is thus shared between people and languages from that area. There is no English translation for the Chinese expression covering the broader Yue people, and so I use 'Cantonese' as the nearest equivalent.

<sup>3</sup>Estimates by Ethnologue: <https://www.ethnologue.com/statistics/size> (accessed 13 June 2017). Heritage language loss is common in diasporic groups, so the worldwide number of ethnically Cantonese people is probably larger than the number of speakers, but harder to document.

<sup>4</sup>As I will discuss later, the title 'General's Ode' applies to a tune family with many versions and variants but is also used for several unrelated pieces.

<sup>5</sup>Romanised Chinese names are provided in the typical Chinese order (surname first), as are those written in Chinese characters. People with a non-Chinese given name are presented in the standard English order (surname last).

to become a cosmopolitan city of seven million people, fuelled primarily by migration from Guangdong. It is thus a site of local diaspora. The main ports for early emigration from China were Hong Kong and Macau in Guangdong Province, as well as Xiamen in neighbouring Fujian Province, establishing a global Chinese diaspora over a century of migration that began in the 1850s. There are now an estimated 50 million people of Chinese descent living outside China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan (Wang 2012). Dispersed among 130 countries, the largest concentration of the Chinese diaspora (75%) is found in Southeast Asia and the second largest (14%) in North America (Li and Li 2013). Trans-Pacific migration to the Americas and Australasia was almost exclusively undertaken by people from Guangdong, not Fujian, hence the idea of a Cantonese Pacific. Since the 1980s, increased migration from other parts of China has contributed to a diversification of overseas Chinese communities, but the roots of the earliest migrants run deep.

The Cantonese Pacific was made possible because Hong Kong connected—and continues to connect—migrants to a network of (now former) British colonies and American territories. Established through a century-long process of circular migration, people maintain familial, business, political and/or social ties on both sides of the ocean. Hong Kong is still the epicentre of Cantonese language media and remains a global hub for the circulation of people, finances and goods. Its audio-visual products have long had distribution both within the People's Republic of China (PRC) and throughout diasporic networks, helping Cantonese people to remain connected across geo-political divides.

Cantonese people are ostensibly part of the Han ethnicity, which includes the vast majority of Chinese.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, they remain a distinct ethno-linguistic group; their version of Chinese culture is lively, thanks to Cantonese-language music, books, comics, opera, theatre, film, radio and television. Despite a vivid culture, Cantonese people have long found themselves on the margins of larger, more powerful groups. Whether in the PRC, in the former British colony of Hong Kong and Portuguese colony of Macau (now both returned to the PRC as Special Administrative Regions) or in diaspora, there remains an also/and condition whereby Cantonese people have multiple civic, cultural and ethnic affinities. Compound and flexible experiences of imagined community are characteristic of transnations more generally.

Research consultants at Toronto, Canada's Hong Luck Kung Fu Club (est. 1961) sparked my interest in Wong Fei-hung's theme. Between 2008 and 2016, I did participant observation fieldwork there on the percussion music used to accompany Chinese martial arts and the lion dance.<sup>7</sup> Located in a large urban Chinatown, Hong Luck's multigenerational membership was predominantly Chinese Canadian, although the club was still quite multicultural. The circular migration patterns of the Cantonese Pacific were evident at my fieldwork site, inflecting people's life-worlds with transnational connections. I was not specifically researching Master Wong's song at Hong Luck, but it came up too regularly

<sup>6</sup>A unified Han ethno-national group is as problematic as any other ethnicity, but its fissures are magnified by its billion-plus size. Kevin Carrico (2012) has discussed the power play of a centre/periphery dichotomy where Cantonese people are not considered fully Han. Diana Lary (1996) has examined the durability of Cantonese identity as the cultural heritage of the ancient Kingdom of Nanyue [南越], which was annexed by Han Chinese invaders from the north over two millennia ago.

<sup>7</sup>I have published on the choreomusical relationships between sound and movement in southern Chinese kung fu, lion dance and percussion (McGuire 2015), and am currently working on a book manuscript that augments and expands my dissertation (McGuire 2014), focusing on resistance and identity embodied in Hong Luck's interdisciplinary martial arts.

to ignore. Several of my consultants proudly suggested that the tune was a Chinese anthem, but also that it was specifically Cantonese, alluding to overlapping categories of nationality.<sup>8</sup>

The connection between this piece of music and Chinese martial arts is unquestionable thanks to Hong Kong cinema, but I wondered whether there might be a bias at play regarding the tune's broader fame. Despite being of Euro Canadian heritage, I too had long been familiar with Master Wong's theme thanks to my background as a practitioner of Chinese martial arts, a fan of kung fu movies and a speaker of Cantonese, but that is not an ideal measure. Was it well known enough to generate unisonance for Cantonese people? Music scholar Yu Siu-wah is critical of this song being considered 'truly' Cantonese because of its history (as I will explain later), but he still concedes that 'its popularity and social recognition in Hong Kong is overwhelming' (Yu Siu-wah 2013: 163). I contend that the networks of the Cantonese Pacific have spread that overwhelming popularity and social recognition throughout the Yue world.

The research for this article draws on mixed methods. Fieldwork consultants at Hong Luck alerted me to the idea of a transnational anthem, which I investigated further with virtual ethnography online. There are many videos featuring the Wong Fei-hung song on the Internet, allowing me to review public commentary on the music's resonance. In order to evaluate claims about the Cantonese-ness of this piece, I have also done musical and linguistic analysis comparing Cantonese versions of the song with those sung in Mandarin, aka Putonghua, the PRC's official national language. My interpretation of the Wong Fei-hung theme engages with the intertextuality of music and martial arts, with attention to its potential for representing, creating and contesting Cantonese identity via shared musical belonging. In what follows, I will: establish a theoretical framework; provide a description of the song's history; discuss people's comments on the song; explain how the version with lyrics was composed; analyse the relationship of speech-tone to melody; and finish with a discussion of how music, film and martial arts intersect.

## Nations, states and anthems

In identifying an unofficial Cantonese anthem, I interrogate the hegemony of states as the exclusive category for national identity. In this article, I use state to refer to an autonomous political jurisdiction with authority over the citizens/residents of its defined territory, and nation for an ethno-cultural group with a common history, typically sharing a language and an idealised homeland, but also including diaspora. When Anderson defined nation as 'an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign' ([1983] 2006: 6), he was more specifically referring to a nation-state, which fuses the meaning of both words. The increasing worldwide importance of diasporas and transnational flows suggests that a word other than nation, state or nation-state might better accommodate some of the complexities of a globalised-yet-connected world.

Cantonese people can be thought of as a transnation, which is a term proposed by Arjun Appadurai (1993) to account for the de-territorialised identification of diasporic

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<sup>8</sup>Conversations on the Wong Fei-hung song were held in English.

communities who still maintain an ideological link to their places of origin. Appadurai also applies this idea to other social groups that may ultimately command more loyalty than the nation-state (religious, philanthropic and queer, among others), while noting that people often have multiple and variable ‘patriotisms’. Taking the concept further, post-colonial studies scholar Bill Ashcroft (2010) identifies transnation as being a horizontal phenomenon that can exceed the boundaries of the nation-state even when it remains within the geographic borders. His argument was inspired by the examples of China and India, where internal migration, displacement and translation result in diasporas within state boundaries.

When nation and state do not line up neatly, patriotic national symbols like anthems and flags can be problematic. By way of comparison to the Cantonese situation, I offer two examples of transnations within the borders of larger nation-states. Scotland in the United Kingdom and Québec in Canada have resilient national identities, but neither is politically sovereign—despite both having held referenda on separation. Significantly, these transnations have widely used unofficial anthems. ‘Flower of Scotland’ is played when Scottish teams compete in international sports (e.g., rugby and soccer) and ‘*Gen du Pays*’ [‘Folks of the Homeland’] is sung by Québécois people at political events and Fête de la Saint-Jean-Baptiste (the province’s national holiday).

When an imagined community is connected through music, the result is like a large-scale version of Shelemay’s idea of musical community (2011: 364–5), and in diaspora such connections are an integral part of forming, shaping and maintaining transnational subjectivities (Averill 1994; Marshall 2008). My interpretation of the Wong Fei-hung song takes the idea of a musical community, with a shared genre, repertoire and performance practice, and distils it down in order to focus more narrowly on a single song (with many versions) as an unofficial transnational anthem. As Christopher Waterman has observed with regard to *jùjú* music among Yoruba people in Nigeria, musical metaphor has a powerful ability to portray an imagined community, disseminating communal ideals and promoting a sense of shared identity (Waterman 1990: 221). This power is remarkable, considering that in both the Yoruba and Cantonese examples, modernised music still manages to signify traditional values.

Notwithstanding a lack of official status, a transnation’s anthem can sound feelings that interconnect people into an imagined community across political and geographic divides. All unisonant experiences are connections of musical commonality for people who cannot have a face-to-face relationship with each member of their group. At the same time, the very nature of such feelings highlights the multiplicity of identities inherent in a global world where people have plural, overlapping affiliations. When conceived as extending beyond official anthems, the interpretive power of unisonance lies in helping us think about the processes of imagined collective experience. Transnational unisonance is not the same as top-down legislation that makes an anthem into an official, collective, ritual music (Daughtry 2003). Rather, the unisonant experience of transnation is musical being-in-the-world that can contest the conflation of ethnicity, citizenship and nationality. More broadly, unisonance also points to musical inter-being that can shift based on context, time or location because people could conceivably experience it with both official and unofficial anthems. Either way, such large-scale musicking establishes ‘a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. ... they



model, or stand as metaphor for, ideal relationships as the participants in the performance imagine them to be' (Small 1998: 13).

## The Wong Fei-hung song from three angles

### *History of a Cantonese folk hero and his double-appropriated song*

The version of 'General's Ode' that is now associated with Wong Fei-hung has a long history, including a musical life before it was heard in films. According to Yu Siu-wah (2013), the oldest known source for this melody is a compilation of Chinese string ensemble arrangements dated 1814. In that manuscript, the piece was associated with the Manchu ethnic minority who ruled China's last imperial dynasty, the Qing (1644–1911). During the Republican Era in China (1912–49), intellectuals promoted a New Culture Movement to modernise, democratise and secularise China, which helped inspire musical innovation (Wang 2001: 12). The emergence of large-scale Chinese orchestras called for new repertoire, giving rise to a 'national music' [國樂] in service of the fledgling Republic of China's nation-building efforts. In 1929, Shanghai's Great Community Music Society [大同樂會] scored a new arrangement of 'General's Ode' as part of a suite called *Grand National Music* [《國民大樂》], and went on to make recordings of it in the 1930s. It was one of these recordings that was eventually used in Hong Kong's Wong Fei-hung films.

The Great Community Music Society recognised the powerful and inspiring martial character of 'General's Ode', and so it was included in their nationalist-oriented repertoire (Yu Siu-wah 2013: 158–9). The piece has a strong military association in its programmatic title and section headings,<sup>9</sup> and the aesthetics of the musical sound fall under the martial end of the 'civil/martial' [文武] dichotomy that Stephen Jones identifies as a primary stylistic bifurcation of Chinese music (1995: 93–94). Furthermore, the tune of 'General's Ode' is a 'labelled melody' [曲牌], which means that it is used, adapted and varied across a variety of Chinese instrumental and vocal genres as a sort of leitmotiv (Jones 1995: 130, 138–40). Experienced audiences would associate it with battles, heroes and bravery because of consistent textual and contextual imagery (Weng 2014: 147). I suggest that years of on-screen use deposited additional layers of signification in the music specifically related to Wong Fei-hung as a Cantonese kung fu master.

The historical Wong Fei-hung was from the village of Foshan in Guangdong Province, which lies just outside the capital city of Guangzhou. Born circa 1847, he lived through the turbulent end of China's last imperial dynasty and the founding of the Republic of China in 1912, before dying in approximately 1924. Master Wong was a renowned practitioner of the Hung family style of southern Chinese martial arts, aka Hung Gar [洪家拳]. He was the head trainer of the local militia and also a doctor of Chinese medicine. The scant factual details about his life provided a skeleton for apotheosis. Beginning in the late 1920s, a student of the recently deceased Master Wong named Chu Yu-chai [朱愚齋] began writing serialised stories that appeared in a Hong Kong newspaper. Chu claimed to have based his stories in fact (cited in Lau 2012), providing the essential grains of truth for the myth to grow from. The newspaper serials were eventually compiled into

<sup>9</sup>Examples of programmatic sub-titles in 'General's Ode' include: 'Three Strategies for Victory' and 'After Victory, Returning to Camp' (trans. Myers 1992: 92).



novels, becoming so popular that they were also narrated on the radio. In 1949, director Wu Pang [胡鵬] began adapting Chu's stories to become the first series of Wong Fei-hung films.

The invented tradition of the Wong Fei-hung song began in 1956 when a recording of the re-arranged Manchu 'General's Ode' performed by a Shanghainese orchestra became the opening theme music for Hong Kong movies featuring a Cantonese martial arts folk hero. The film series actually started a bit earlier,<sup>10</sup> with actor Kwan Tak-hing [關德興] playing the role of Wong Fei-hung in 68 feature-length moving pictures between 1949 and 1970. These movies established a firm link between song and character. Kwan himself became strongly associated with Master Wong, embodying the epitome of a Confucian patriarch: upright and disciplined, but also magnanimous. The world of these films was old-time Guangdong, filled with nostalgia for a rapidly fading past. New recordings of the music by Hong Kong musicians eventually helped to appropriate the tune as a part of Cantonese culture.

The Wong Fei-hung franchise was popular, continuing even after Kwan Tak-hing retired. Successful films were released throughout the 1970s and 1980s, with the most famous ones coming in the 1990s when auteur filmmaker Tsui Hark [徐克] produced a six-part series that updated the character for a new generation of audiences (Hung 1997; Tsui 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994; Yuen 1993). In the early twenty-first century, there was a dearth of new films featuring Wong Fei-hung, but the franchise continued on television. Master Wong and his song finally returned to the silver screen in 2014 with a slick China/Hong Kong co-produced blockbuster. In this article, I focus primarily on Tsui Hark's 1990s sextet of *Once Upon a Time in China* (OUATIC) films. The new version of Wong Fei-hung was younger than Kwan Tak-hing's, being played by Jet Li [李連傑] in parts one to three, by Vincent Zhao [趙文卓] in parts four to five and by Jet Li again in part six. Although Master Wong still embodied Confucian virtues, he negotiated a world of modernisation, rather than nostalgia. Over the course of Tsui's films, Wong Fei-hung navigates China's tumultuous emergence as a nation-state amid the incursion of globalisation. Master Wong battles not only foreign interlopers, but also corrupt Qing officials and dangerous Chinese cults. The last instalment of the series takes place in the USA, featuring righteous fisticuffs with anti-Chinese American authorities and connecting to the processes of the Cantonese Pacific.

Part of the new OUATIC series' success was a re-working of the theme music by composer and lyricist James Wong [黃霑]. This version of the song completed the 'Cantonisation' by adding Cantonese lyrics. Through arrangement, orchestration and record production it became a Canto-pop tune, enhancing its popularity outside cinemas. I translate the title of James Wong's version as 'A Man Should Self-Strengthen' [〈男兒當自強〉].

It is worth noting that instrumental variations of 'A Man Should Self-Strengthen' were also used in the OUATIC series, underscoring many scenes featuring Master Wong and deepening the intertextual association between music and hero.<sup>11</sup> While many of these moments involved kung fu fighting, the musical theme was not restricted to martial

<sup>10</sup>The original film series appears to have contained four instalments before 'General's Ode' was used (Yu Siu-wah 2012: 69).

<sup>11</sup>For discussion of the other music found in Tsui Hark's OUATIC series, see Weng (2014) on how musical genre conventions—Chinese and Hollywood—intersect with cinematic tropes to signify elements of narrative and identity. For the older films featuring Kwan Tak-hing, see Yu Siu-wah (2012) on the diegetic and non-diegetic use of Cantonese folk, operatic and chamber music to evoke the soundscape of old Guangdong.

arts action. For examples, in the first movie (Tsui 1991) the song also plays during a dinner scene showing Wong Fei-hung and his students deepening their social bond, as well as in a scene where Master Wong is being measured for a modern, western-style suit. In the second part of the series (Tsui 1992), the melody underscores Wong Fei-hung using Chinese medicine and Sun Yat-sen [孫中山] using western medicine as they work together to treat a group of injured people. Sun was a revolutionary leader who became (briefly) the first president of the Republic of China; he is revered in both the PRC and Taiwan as the father of modern China. In this scene, the conversation between fellow Guangdong natives Master Wong and Dr Sun shows them to be kindred spirits in their devotion to the abstract idea of a Chinese nation. In the final movie of the series (Hung 1997), Wong Fei-hung suffers amnesia after an accident while visiting his student in the USA, and only regains his memory upon hearing a musical ensemble play ‘A Man Should Self-Strengthen’. This scene is the only instance in the entire series where this song is diegetic. Through repeated association, the Wong Fei-hung song is intertextually imbued with the themes it has underscored. The many action sequences make it music for bravery, rectitude and resistance, but other scenes attach the song to ideas such as sociality, modernisation, patriotism and diasporic memory.

Over the decades, a plethora of films and television shows featuring Wong Fei-hung firmly entrenched him and his music in the texture of Cantonese culture. Moreover, he is also a part of Chinese culture more broadly, as well as a hero to global audiences of kung fu movie fans. Master Wong is now a cultural icon embedded in an elaborate narrative context that connects him not only to martial virtues like bravery, discipline, skill, strategy, strength and righteousness, but also Confucian values of filial piety, learning, benevolence, tolerance and forgiveness. He is constructed as a patriot to an abstract China that never really was, circulating in transnational flows, while remaining rooted in his Guangdong origins.

### ***Ethnographic commentary on the Wong Fei-hung song***

As I mentioned in the Introduction, Master Wong’s theme music was an unavoidable aspect of my fieldwork at Toronto’s Hong Luck Kung Fu Club—despite not being the focus of my research there. Shortly after I began taking classes at Hong Luck in 2008, I discovered a burned CD labelled ‘kung fu training music’ with no less than ten different versions of the Wong Fei-hung song. None of my teachers played the CD in class, although some of the other teachers apparently did. Years later I was teaching at Hong Luck and a pair of my young, male, Chinese Canadian students would sometimes sing ‘A Man Should Self-Strengthen’ to motivate themselves during workouts. When Hong Luck gave public demonstrations of martial arts, the club’s percussionists usually accompanied the action with gong, drum and cymbals. Occasionally, however, members would perform to the Wong Fei-hung theme instead. They did so when it was a group demo, rather than the typical solo or duo. As compared to the asynchronous, combative relationship of sound and movement when kung fu was performed to live percussion (see McGuire 2015), group martial arts performances to the Wong Fei-hung song were synchronous, embodying solidarity through martial movement. In 2011/12, I spent two semesters as an exchange student at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, where I observed similar group performances of kung fu done to the Wong Fei-hung song at public celebrations

like the Mid-Autumn Festival [中秋節] or the 60th anniversary banquet of Chinese University of Hong Kong's Chung Chi College. Back in Toronto, 'A Man Should Self-Strengthen' was also an evergreen favourite for karaoke at Hong Luck's annual banquet. Several Chinese Canadian consultants have confirmed that the song was still popular in non-kung fu karaoke, especially among middle-aged men.

The Wong Fei-hung song was also an embedded feature of the soundscape outside the club. In Hong Luck's local Chinatown, no DVD vendor was without Wong Fei-hung movies, meaning the discs were being played in people's homes. I occasionally overheard a Cantonese 'silk and bamboo' [廣東絲竹] ensemble practising 'A Man Should Self-Strengthen'/'General's Ode' in a community hall down the street from Hong Luck. Over the years, I even heard Master Wong's song as a ringtone stridently blasting from a couple of people's cell phones. As one junior member of Hong Luck explained in the winter of 2011, she knew the Wong Fei-hung song before seeing the movies simply because she was Chinese, referring to the commonness of the piece in the local community.

Two particular conversations encapsulate the issues I am investigating in this article. The first was with a married couple who were both senior members of Hong Luck. In 2013, I was helping them select the music for a presentation eulogising the club's former head instructor, Master Paul Chan [陳樹郁師傅] (1932–2012). The husband suggested that the Wong Fei-hung song was the most appropriate accompaniment for the eulogy presentation because it was like a national anthem and Master Paul was a hero to his community—in both Canada and China. The wife responded that she preferred Jackie Chan's [成龍] singing voice in the Mandarin version of 'A Man Should Self-Strengthen' from the second OUATIC film (Tsui 1992) over that of George Lam [林子祥] in the original Cantonese version from the first part of the series (Tsui 1991), but that the song only sounded 'right' in Cantonese. While she insisted that the song's Cantonese-ness was more important than performative vocal qualities, we ended up using an instrumental version to avoid the aesthetic dilemma. My pair of Chinese Canadian consultants were in agreement that the song was meant to be Cantonese, hinting at the existence of a transnation for whom this piece was unisonant—even as an instrumental.

The next significant conversation I had was a sidebar with a fellow Hong Luck member in the summer of 2016 as a group of us were waiting to perform the lion dance at a wedding reception in a suburb of Toronto. There were eight performers relaxing in an anteroom before the show, and the Wong Fei-hung song had come up in the flow of casual conversation. The 25-year-old, Chinese Canadian, lion dancer sitting next to me mentioned that he had always wanted to sing the song at karaoke but had never had the courage. The rest of the group's conversation continued without us as I followed up. It turned out he was concerned that he would not have been able to provide a suitably powerful musical performance. He said that the song was like a Chinese national anthem, and so it required more respect than the average karaoke tune. Upon further discussion, my consultant equivocated that it was more specifically a Cantonese anthem, although he thought Chinese people of other backgrounds still felt strongly about it. An important part of this consultant's reluctance to sing 'A Man Should Self-Strengthen' came from his understanding of the performance that the audience would expect. He felt that the song required strong singing as a reflection of its martial ethos, but that he might not be up

to the task. Reflecting back on the four or so karaoke performances of the Wong Fei-hung song that I had observed in person at banquets over the years, I realised that only one of the singers had (mostly) correct pitch, accurate timing and skilled inflection. All of the performances, however, had been delivered with great gusto, earning above-average applause from the crowds.

For this article, I wanted to investigate whether or not opinions about the anthemic Cantonese-ness of the song were held more widely, and so I took to the Internet. YouTube is the world's most popular video website and is where I started my net-ethnography,<sup>12</sup> although I also looked at Youku Tudou, the largest online video platform in China. I searched using both English and Chinese text for the Wong Fei-hung theme song, 'General's Ode' and 'A Man Should Self-Strengthen', and selected the top relevant results by total number of views, which amounted to nearly 8,000,000 combined plays. The videos included both Cantonese and Mandarin renditions of James Wong's vocal version of the classic tune, providing over 2500 comments on seven videos.<sup>13</sup> On YouTube, the comments were mostly in either English or Chinese in accordance with the written language of the video title, while on Youku Tudou the responses were exclusively in Chinese.<sup>14</sup> In general, there was a mix of nostalgic remarks about the song/films, debate about the actors/singers and appreciation for Chinese martial arts, as well as plenty of Internet chatter. I will focus my discussion on the comments most relevant to this article, specifically those related to anthemic qualities and the Cantonese-ness of the song.

In English, I found more remarks about the Wong Fei-hung song being a Chinese anthem, whereas in Chinese the claims tended towards it being a Cantonese song with nationalistic flavour. English YouTube comments included statements such as 'literally, every Chinese person knows this song. (i)t's practically the unofficial anthem of China' (curtainofdreams, 2012)<sup>15</sup> and '(i)f you consider yourself truly Chinese then this is China's true anthem. Anyone who is Chinese and passionate of their heritage will instantly feel an unexplainable burning connection when hearing this song' (shindukess, 2013).<sup>16</sup> The most liked comment on one Mandarin version on YouTube also included nationalistic comments: 'I though (sic) this was the China's national anthem' (aizoazoa, 2014).<sup>17</sup> On the other YouTube Mandarin version, however, there was some anti-Mandarin/PRC invective, which suggests a sense of ownership by Cantonese/Hong Kong people that might have been censored on Youku Tudou. For example, in response to a poster who thanked China for making the West stop looking down on Asia, someone wrote 'Hong Kong is my country! we are not fucking Chinese! Long live Hongkongese!' (changxin ping, 2017).<sup>18</sup> Another commenter quipped '(f)uck the Mandarin version' (La Wronged Queen, 2015).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>12</sup>YouTube is blocked in the PRC, but not in Hong Kong, Macau or Taiwan. Nonetheless, people in the PRC can—and do—use virtual private network technology to get around 'The Great Firewall of China'.

<sup>13</sup>See <https://youtu.be/yso4igoMluU> (accessed 8–12 May 2017, since removed for copyright violation), <https://youtu.be/WcM1lbtRMrE>, <https://youtu.be/G5XYq7T2uQY>, <https://youtu.be/MD2PD0JNKPg> and <https://youtu.be/HP4LPndqAUU> (all accessed 8–12 May 2017 and 20 September 2017) and [http://v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XNzM2NTg3NDA4.html](http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNzM2NTg3NDA4.html) and [http://v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XMzU5MTg3MTI=.html](http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMzU5MTg3MTI=.html) (both accessed 7–9 February 2018).

<sup>14</sup>Chinese comments used Written Vernacular Chinese, which is the shared textual system of mutually unintelligible spoken Sinitic languages.

<sup>15</sup>See <https://goo.gl/qso4tb> (accessed 8–12 May 2017).

<sup>16</sup>See <https://goo.gl/MAU2a5> (accessed 8–12 May 2017).

<sup>17</sup>See <https://goo.gl/iqWwuS> (accessed 8–12 May 2017).

<sup>18</sup>See <https://goo.gl/mJmkFJ> (accessed 8–12 May 2017).

<sup>19</sup>See <https://goo.gl/Nhev1B> (accessed 8–12 May 2017).

In Chinese responses to the videos, people got into more detailed debates about language. Some observed that the song still sounded good in Mandarin, and that it made the lyrics accessible to people who do not know Cantonese. Comments comparing linguistic versions, however, tended to argue that the Cantonese version sounded not just better, but more powerful. These remarks clarified feelings of identification and pride that make the Wong Fei-hung song more meaningful in Cantonese. For example, commenters on a YouTube Mandarin version suggested that the Cantonese version was ‘even more manly’ [「更有男子气概」] (Oculus Universale, 2016)<sup>20</sup> or ‘comparatively arousing to indignation’ [「比較激昂」] (Arthur Wang, 2017).<sup>21</sup> Tellingly, a commenter on a Youku Tudou video of the Mandarin version argued that ‘how it feels to sing in Cantonese is domineering, Mandarin has the flavour of Manchu/Qing humiliation’ [「怎么感觉用粤语唱那么霸气 国语反倒有股满清屈辱的味道」] (李某某88021483, 2014).<sup>22</sup>

Chinese responses also addressed issues of nationalism and ethnic identity. On a Cantonese YouTube version, one person wrote that ‘this song is filled with patriotism!’ [「这首歌充满的爱国主义！」] (Fish 123, 2017),<sup>23</sup> while another remarked that ‘Cantonese people are really patriotic’ [「广东人是真爱国」] (John Nan, 2017).<sup>24</sup> Only one Chinese response claimed ‘this song is a national anthem’ [「这首作国歌吧～！」] (中国第一美男 2012),<sup>25</sup> which was on a Youku Tudou Mandarin version. Although they did not say for whom it was an anthem, their username includes the word China, suggesting that unisonance with the Wong Fei-hung song can occur when imagining the PRC’s community, too. Taken together, these various opinions hint at the ambivalence of a Cantonese transnation that is culturally Chinese, but that always-already exceeds the PRC as a nation-state.

While there was no simple consensus among online commenters, a general pattern emerged among the approximately 4% of people discussing language. Figure 1 shows a chart of the trend towards pro-Cantonese/anti-Mandarin comments as an average of the top two YouTube and top two Youku Tudou videos for ‘A Man Should Self-Strengthen’. I cannot presume to draw universal conclusions from this sample. Nonetheless, a majority of commenters who discussed language issues either supported Cantonese lyrics or denigrated the use of Mandarin, demonstrating that my fieldwork consultants’ opinions are held beyond the Hong Luck Kung Fu Club.

### *Composition of a Cantonese anthem*

I will now examine James Wong’s ‘A Man Should Self-Strengthen’ more closely in order to investigate claims about the Cantonese-ness of the piece. A particularly helpful YouTube comment compared the two languages used to sing ‘A Man Should Self-Strengthen’ and argued that ‘the Cantonese version has more momentum, moreover the Cantonese version is more vivid, and more rhyming’ [「粵語版更有氣勢，而且粵語版更傳神、更押韻」] (SW Chan, 2016).<sup>26</sup> The Mandarin version actually rhymes fairly well in terms of

<sup>20</sup>See <https://goo.gl/4QfpuE> (accessed 8–12 May 2017).

<sup>21</sup>See <https://goo.gl/CVnYLG> (accessed 8–12 May 2017).

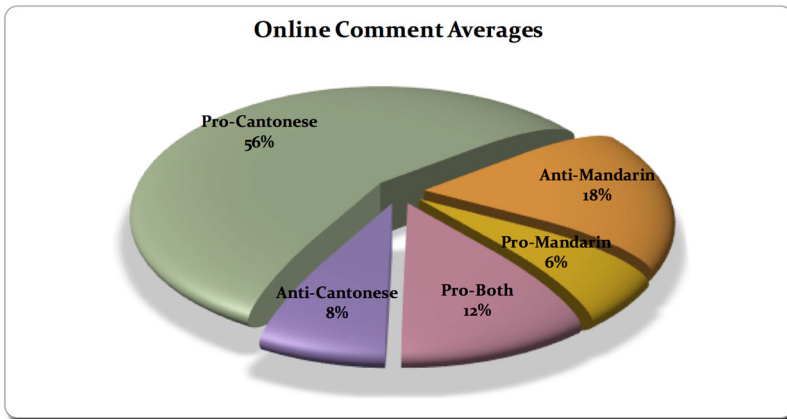
<sup>22</sup>See [http://v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XMzU5MTg3MTI=.html](http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMzU5MTg3MTI=.html) (accessed 7–9 February 2018). Note: it is not possible to extract a URL for individual comments on Youku Tudou.

<sup>23</sup>See <https://goo.gl/SKg3YA> (accessed 8–12 May 2017).

<sup>24</sup>See <https://goo.gl/Kvi1cE> (accessed 8–12 May 2017).

<sup>25</sup>See [http://v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XMzU5MTg3MTI=.html](http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMzU5MTg3MTI=.html) (accessed 7–9 February 2018).

<sup>26</sup>See <https://goo.gl/cGxi5b> (accessed 8–12 May 2017).



**Figure 1.** Language preference averages of online video commenters.

agreement between the sounds of words at the ends of successive phrases. I suspect that this commenter was hearing the alignment between linguistic tone and melody, which echoes my previously mentioned Hong Luck consultant's view that only the Cantonese version sounded 'right'. Sinitic languages are tonal, meaning the relative pitch, contour, duration and other associated factors of otherwise homophonous words gives them different lexical meanings. Based on the common practice of matching tone and melody in Canto-pop (Wong and Diehl 2002), I expected the Wong Fei-hung song would have a stronger connection to Cantonese than Mandarin and provide empirical evidence for my consultants' views.

The compositional approach that led to the original recording of 'A Man Should Self-Strengthen' stamped it as Cantonese musicking. In a chapter about his experiences composing music for Tsui Hark's films, James Wong (2002) detailed the process. He claimed that he spent two months working on 'General's Ode' for Tsui's first OUATIC film, consulting 20 different versions and refining the original 500 bars down to 100. It was still going to be an instrumental piece, until George Lam said he had always wanted to perform 'General's Ode'. Lam was about to leave Hong Kong for an extended stay abroad, so James Wong had to write the lyrics in one day and have them recorded that night. This narrative reads like a mythic challenge, which, true or not, adds to the heroic ethos of the song.

Similar to the rehearsal-less creative processes of traditional Cantonese opera described by Bell Yung (1983), a familiar melody combined with close alignment between speech-tone and melodic contour facilitated George Lam's job as singer. In fact, speaking the Cantonese lyrics gives a fairly close approximation of the sung contour, with minor exceptions. In some spots, there is oblique motion between the melodic pitch contour and speech-tone, but Lam's singing uses slides, bends and grace notes to help maintain a closer homology. In other spots where the same speech-tone is repeated one or more times in a row, the melody does not repeat the same pitch. Yung noticed a similar 'rule' of non-repetition in Cantonese opera examples (1983: 41). As Stock (1999) has argued with regard to Beijing opera, a genre also featuring a high degree of speech-tone/melody convergence, musical considerations may at times outweigh linguistic ones for aesthetic reasons. Besides,



Murray Schellenberg (2012) suggests that changing a few speech-tones to accommodate a melody does not present a comprehension problem for native listeners across a variety of tone languages.

The Mandarin version does not match speech-tone with musical contour, and this misalignment has two important ramifications. First, there can be some difficulties in comprehension of sung tone languages that do not follow the melody—unless grammar, syntax and context give the listener clues to the lyrical meaning. Although Mandarin pop songs do not typically feature the sort of alignment that Cantonese ones do (Ho 2006), they are not exempt from being intelligible. In the case of ‘A Man Should Self-Strengthen’, simply using Mandarin pronunciations of the written Chinese characters might have been unclear. In comparing the Cantonese and Mandarin lyrics, I discovered several characters were different. These changes may make the meaning of the words more accessible in Mandarin, but some of the poetic qualities of the Cantonese original are lost.

Second, there is something satisfying about the integration of Cantonese speech-tone with Wong Fei-hung’s melody, which is absent from the Mandarin version. When my consultants at Hong Luck and online commenters argued that the Cantonese version sounds right or is more rhyming, their opinion is not merely chauvinism. I suggest they are experiencing a merging of language and music on a deep level, as though ‘General’s Ode’ had always had words. The naturalness is, of course, constructed and ahistorical, but it speaks to a special feeling of identification with the Wong Fei-hung song that Cantonese-speakers have. Mandarin-speaking Chinese people can also experience patriotic sentiments when hearing ‘A Man Should Self-Strengthen’, which is evidenced by comments online. Nonetheless, I contend that the song’s longstanding prevalence in Cantonese culture, bolstered by the vital integration of speech-tone and musical contour in the Cantonese version, contribute to a unisonance unequalled by the Mandarin version.

Figure 2 shows a transcription comparing the speech-tone and musical contour relationships I have been describing. The notation shows the melody on the first staff and approximates the tone patterns of the Cantonese and Mandarin texts on the next two staves. The Chinese characters are in traditional script for Cantonese and simplified for Mandarin, which accords with convention in Hong Kong versus the PRC. The romanised lyrics include tone marks according to the Yale and Hanyu Pinyin systems respectively.

### **Intertextual meanings: a man should self-strengthen upon the general’s orders**

The very first scene of OUATIC functions as a prologue, providing historical context for the rest of the film series before segueing into the first appearance of ‘A Man Should Self-Strengthen’. The story begins in the late Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). The *mise-en-scène* shows a performance aboard the ship of an army general who is about to set sail. Wong Fei-hung’s students are doing the southern Chinese lion dance, which is part of many Cantonese kung fu styles and traditionally functions as a ritual blessing/exorcism for new beginnings (McGuire 2014). Firecrackers are part of the performance, which western sailors mistake for gunfire. They shoot back at the lion dancers, who drop their masked costume. Wong Fei-hung leaps to catch the lion before it can land on the ground and proceeds to finish the performance. Afterwards, he and the army general



## 'A Man Should Self-Strengthen'

(男兒當自強)

James Wong

$\text{♩} = 60$

The figure shows a musical score for the song 'A Man Should Self-Strengthen' (男兒當自強) by James Wong. The score is written in 4/4 time with a tempo of 60 beats per minute. It consists of three staves: Melody, Cantonese lyrics, and Mandarin lyrics. The Melody staff is in treble clef. The Cantonese lyrics are written in pinyin, and the Mandarin lyrics are written in Chinese characters. The lyrics are: ouh hei ouh siu maahn chühng lohng yiht hyut yiht sing hühng yaht gwōng (傲氣傲笑萬重浪熱血熱勝雄日光) and ào qì miàn duì wàn chóng làng rè xuè xiàng nà hóng rì guāng (傲氣面對萬重浪熱血像那紅日光).

**Figure 2.** Transcription of first couplet in 'A Man Should Self-Strengthen'.

discuss the current state of affairs in China, and then the scene cuts to the opening credits underscored by 'A Man Should Self-Strengthen'. This initial presentation of James Wong's version of the Wong Fei-hung song is the quintessential iteration.

The opening sequence establishes a central theme that is elaborated throughout the series: the negotiation of Chinese culture in modernity through kung fu as a tactic of resistance. This theme is elaborated in three main ways. First, Wong Fei-hung finishing the lion dance—even under threat of being shot—expounds Chinese steadfastness and bravery. During the late Qing Dynasty, martial arts practitioners re-imagined older lion dance practices as embodying China's position as a sleeping giant (Hu 1995). In this broader symbolic realm, the shots fired against the lion dancers are attacks on China, and so Wong Fei-hung's actions take on heroic value as he fights for the 'awakened lion' [醒獅].

Second, the dialogue that follows the lion dance makes the idea of resistance explicit. The army general rails against the unequal treaties China had been forced to sign with foreign powers, requesting that Wong Fei-hung form a civilian militia to defend the nation. This brief dialogue frames the film's narrative with a decaying Qing Dynasty and foreign aggression. It also mythologises Wong Fei-hung and kung fu at the centre of the proto-nationalist movement seeking Chinese 'self-strengthening' [自強]. The belief was that strong bodies, especially when forged through nationalistic activities like kung fu, would result in a body-politic able to resist foreign incursion (Morris 2004).

Third, the prologue concludes with the first appearance of 'A Man Should Self-Strengthen', which musically answers the call of the departing army general and plays on an ambiguity in the Chinese name of the labelled melody. As the film's opening credits roll, Wong Fei-hung is leading a large group of men (presumably his civilian militia) in martial arts practice on a beach. While the music is non-diegetic, it is eminently suitable. All of the kung fu practitioners except Master Wong are shirtless, exposing their toned physiques and showing that they have indeed strengthened themselves. The words of the Qing general are being heeded, pointing to a dual meaning in Chinese for 'General's Ode'. It can also be read as 'General's Command' because the final character of the name,

令 [Cantonese: *lihng*], commonly refers to an order or command in Modern Vernacular Chinese. Lawrence Witzleben (2002: 129) and John Myers (1992: 92) have both translated this character as command, but Weng Po-wei (2014: 144) argues that this is a mistranslation, suggesting that *lihng* actually refers to a classical Chinese song form. Both Weng and Jones (1995: 138) prefer to leave *lihng* untranslated as a reference to that established (but archaic) musical structure, while Yu Siu-wah (2012) renders it as ode, giving the title of the piece as ‘Ode to the General’. James Wong’s Cantonese lyrics, the labelled melody, the Wong Fei-hung personage and the opening scene of OUATIC all converge to suggest an ode to self-strengthening upon the general’s orders, thus turning lexical ambiguity into productive multivalence.

Music links the discourse of the prologue to masculine physicality through kung fu as a means of (re-)establishing a Chinese nation that is free from foreign control. This patriotism is not directed at any current nation-state, however, because it is what film critic Stephen Teo theorises ‘is better understood as an abstract kind of cultural nationalism’ (1997: 111). Although ‘A Man Should Self-Strengthen’ does not explicitly mention martial arts or China, it is clear from the intertextual association with Wong Fei-hung that kung fu is the recommended path to becoming a Cantonese/Chinese hero. Wong Fei-hung is strong in body, mind and spirit; he is steadfast in his emerging cosmopolitan Chinese-ness. His battles in the rest of the film series become combats of self-determination, empowering his song to symbolically assert an autonomous Chinese identity for transnational Cantonese subjects.

The Wong Fei-hung song is conspicuously silent about what a woman should do, which is symptomatic of male-dominated, nationalistic constructions of strength in Chinese martial arts cinema (Pang and Wong 2005). While the theme song speaks only of heroic men, the OUATIC films’ narrative relies heavily on a woman. Throughout the series, Rosamund Kwan [關之琳] plays 13th Aunt [十三姨], who is the female protagonist and a distantly related relative of Master Wong. In an analysis of music in the first two parts of OUATIC, Weng (2014) argues that Tsui Hark uses Chinese musical conventions to invert Orientalist discourses and construct a masculine hero. A counterpart of this claim is that 13th Aunt is associated with a feminised West because she is western-educated and wears Victorian clothing. Her scenes, as well as those of other western characters, are underscored by light classical music that sounds weak in comparison to the martial vigour of Wong Fei-hung’s song.

Despite her lack of kung fu skills, 13th Aunt is powerful. She acts as both culture broker and language interpreter for Master Wong in his dealings with foreigners. Throughout the series, she is central to the theme of negotiating cosmopolitan Chinese modernity because she guides the way. The absence of female-ness in Wong Fei-hung’s song is problematic, but somehow does not prevent (some) women from engaging with it. As a top-liked YouTube comment asks, ‘I still love to listen to this song and will sing it, too. I’m a girl, would singing this song be too ... haha?’ [「這首歌我到現在還是很愛聽 也會唱 喔^^我身為女孩子唱這首歌會不會太那個~~~ 哈哈~~」] (張秀鳳, 2016).<sup>27</sup> I propose that it would not be too ‘haha’; Tsui Hark’s Wong Fei-hung would not have been possible without 13th Aunt. Despite a glaring gender imbalance in the Wong Fei-hung song’s lyrics, 13th Aunt is intertextually present in the music, representing

<sup>27</sup>See <https://goo.gl/UU9hVa> (accessed 8–12 May 2017).

women with open-minded intelligence, cosmopolitan adaptability and forward-thinking leadership.

## Conclusion

It would be overstating my claim to insist that the Wong Fei-hung song is the Cantonese anthem. Distinctions between local versus diaspora and Hong Kong/Macau versus the PRC, not to mention generational differences or people's personal agency, ensure that the unisonant experience will vary in intensity for diverse Cantonese audiences—some listeners might even reject it. Nonetheless, the song's remarkable capacity for unisonance makes it a Cantonese anthem, which many people clearly embrace. One of the interesting things about an unofficial anthem is that it does not need to be explicitly or universally recognised as such to provide a feeling of musical inter-being. It is enough to know that the other members of one's community share the piece of music and that it has special relevance to them.

The Wong Fei-hung meme continues to circulate through ever-increasing transnational flows, which has maintained its vitality. National boundaries are porous thanks to affordable international travel, interconnecting transnational diasporas, flourishing global trade and advances in information technology. OUATIC has sustained its international presence through re-releases in successive media formats. The inescapability of the labelled melody and its speech-tone links through 'A Man Should Self-Strengthen' offer unisonance for Cantonese people, and thus the experience of an anthem. The Wong Fei-hung song connects receptive audiences to an imagined community that has heard, is hearing, will hear and might even sing it.

Perhaps more important than availability, people's reception and off-screen usage have cemented the Wong Fei-hung song in Cantonese culture. Discussions with my fieldwork consultants in Toronto about this piece's Cantonese-ness were echoed by comments online, although there were also fans of the Mandarin version. Throughout the Cantonese Pacific, the song continues to be used for kung fu demonstrations and karaoke, continually referencing intertextual associations with martial arts, bravery and resistance to oppression. The tune even featured prominently in the 1997 handover ceremony when Hong Kong was returned from Britain to the PRC, expressing a distinctly Cantonese way of being Chinese (Witzleben 2002).

'A Man Should Self-Strengthen' has also been deployed in political protest, which is a phenomenon requiring further research. A version of the tune with new lyrics is performed at Hong Kong's annual candlelight vigil for the Tiananmen Square Massacre. It might seem like an ironic twist to critique the PRC's actions using a patriotic Chinese song (Li 2001), but it actually makes sense given the music's associations with abstract cultural nationalism. During the 2014 protests of Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement [雨傘運動], two more versions of the Wong Fei-hung song appeared, again with new lyrics. Furthermore, a pro-Beijing lawmaker in Hong Kong infamously suggested that Wong Fei-hung's frequent use of an umbrella as a martial arts implement had inspired the protesters. Practically speaking, they wielded their umbrellas to protect themselves from police tear gas (and rain), but it is interesting that they were perceived as embodying the spirit of Master Wong's heroic resistance to oppression. I must defer consideration of these issues to another paper, but it seems that protests using the sound and image of Master

Wong are empowered by his martial arts ethos, even striking fear into the hearts of opponents.

The *Once Upon a Time in China* series has enduring appeal, despite the historical *mise-en-scène*, because it deals with lasting issues of how identity might be (re)constructed in the face of foreign influence. Tsui's Wong Fei-hung provides a template for Chinese negotiation of modernity by showing a strong hero who can preserve and promote his own culture while adopting influences from others—with help from 13th Aunt. This narrative is attractive vis-à-vis China's tumultuous emergence as a modern nation-state. Master Wong's theme song holds special meaning in Cantonese culture, however, because he is a folk hero from Guangdong who has been a fixture of the Hong Kong film industry for generations. On a local level, it speaks to the risk of Cantonese being extinguished now that Hong Kong and Macau are once again part of the Mandarin-dominated PRC. In fact, Cantonese people in Guangdong have been likened to frogs being slowly boiled alive (Ji 2016), unable to act as hegemonic Mandarin language policies work against them. The Wong Fei-hung song hangs in the balance between being a distinctly Cantonese anthem and being just another part of China's national soundscape (Tuohy 2001).

Beyond the Cantonese example, I suggest that unofficial anthems are important musical manifestations of transnational identities. With the recent rise of populist nationalism, scholars must remain attentive to—and critical of—discourses that erase diversity or demonise Others. An 'us versus them' model is not sustainable. The complexity of transnational flows has complicated the possibility of ethnicity, nationality, residency and citizenship all being in perfect alignment. Thinking about songs that function as anthems for transnations assists important discussions on the postmodern fracturing of belonging and the perpetual becoming of imagined communities. The members of a transnation are unlikely to have a unified, monolithic or exclusive identity, but their flexible negotiation of plural identities speaks to a cosmopolitan world order where also/and is the new normal.

My final consideration is whether or not there might be other candidates for a Cantonese anthem. Yu Siu-wah (2013: 166) proposes 'Fragrant Sacrifice' from the Cantonese opera *Floral Princess* [〈帝女花之香天〉] because it is widely known in Hong Kong and has political overtones. There was also a trend in both Hong Kong and Taiwan during the late 1970s and early 1980s for 'nation songs' [民族歌曲] that performed,<sup>28</sup> celebrated and constructed an abstract cultural China, including such titles as 'Descendants of the Dragon' [〈龍的傳人〉], 'I Am Chinese' [〈我是中國人〉] and 'The Brave Chinese' [〈勇敢的中國人〉] (all cited in Chow 2009). Like the Wong Fei-hung song, some of these tunes later became popular in the PRC as well, where their meanings were (mis)appropriated for the nation-state. These examples speak to the multi-vocal experience of unisonance; however, I question whether any of these pieces could match the transnational and multi-generational appeal of the Wong Fei-hung song for Cantonese people. In contrast, I have been informed that a pro-PRC nation song titled 'Chinese People' [〈中國人〉] became an ironic early 2000s karaoke hit. The track was released by Hong Kong singer Andy Lau [劉德華] in celebration of the 1997 handover, but some folks apparently preferred to sing it mockingly, both in the PRC and in diaspora. The agency in such manipulation of meaning shows how people are not mindlessly affected by unisonance, but rather are able to identify and even creatively subvert it for other purposes.

<sup>28</sup>The word nation is used to refer to these songs in the ethno-cultural sense that I employ in this article.

In terms of current political reality, the PRC's national anthem is 'March of the Volunteers' [〈義勇軍進行曲〉], thus also making it the official anthem of Hong Kong. However, it lacks unisonance for many Cantonese people outside Mainland China. Several Hong Kong examples made the news in late 2017: independence-minded soccer fans booed the anthem before matches; a group of graduands from the Hong Kong College of Technology were ejected from their convocation after refusing to stand for the anthem; and older spectators at a racetrack could not be bothered to stand and/or remove their headwear when the anthem was played. In response, Beijing passed a law in the PRC making disrespect of the anthem punishable by jail-time, which will likely become law in Hong Kong later this year. As for the diaspora, anthropologist Andrea Louie observed that an audience of Chinese American youth were far more enthusiastic about the Wong Fei-hung song at a state-sponsored 'homecoming' festival in Guangzhou than about the 'March of the Volunteers' (2000: 653). I observed similar reactions from Cantonese people of all ages during my fieldwork in Toronto's Chinatown. Regardless of whether it is a case of protest, apathy, unfamiliarity, generational distance or diasporic separation, an anthem without unisonance is no anthem at all. Nonetheless, the Wong Fei-hung song is in good company as an unofficial anthem, because 'March of the Volunteers' was originally a Chinese movie theme song, too (Chi 2007).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Irish Research Council [Grant GOIPD/2016/145].

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